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Fish & Feathers: A manatee, off our coast?

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Article Text:

There have some unusual sightings and catches along the Washington Coast this summer, but none more bizarre than the sighting of a manatee.

While trolling for tuna on a course parallel to the Big Dipper, at about 40 miles off the coast, I received a radio call from a skipper of another charter boat. The skipper, for whom I have great respect as a fisherman and a straight shooter, wishes to remain anonymous for fear of being put in a straight-jacket and sent to a loony bin.

He said, "Did you see that? It was a manatee. It was bigger than a sea lion and about 12 feet long. At first I did not know what it was, but we cruised closer to it and I looked it straight in the eye. I then knew exactly what it was, it stayed on the surface for about two minutes, unafraid and then slipped off into the deep. When my brother, who was also on the charter boat, and I got home, we immediately got on the computer and pulled up a picture of a manatee and it was the same mammal that we had seen that afternoon. I will remember it to my dying day for what it was - a manatee."

Manatees are aquatic animals. They breathe air, they have hair, they are warm blooded. They don't lay eggs and they give milk to their babies. Manatees usually come to the surface every three to four minutes to breathe fresh air. They float up about every 20 minutes for a breath. Just two weeks ago a manatee was spotted on the Atlantic Coast as far north as Virginia, which is the furthest north one has ever been sighted. Average adult manatees are about 10 feet long and weight about 1,200 pounds but they can reach 2,000 pounds and more than 12 feet long. They never stop growing as long as they live! Manatees have tough, grayish-brown wrinkled skin that feels like an elephant's skin. Scientists say that long ago, manatees used to live on land and eat grass like elephants. They have toenails just like elephants.

Manatees do not live in the same place all year. When it is warm they will move into the ocean or the Gulf of Mexico to eat sea grasses.

There are five living species of manatees and dugongs; Florida Manatee (Southern Coast of the United States), Antillean Manatee (Caribbean and coast of Central America), West African Manatee (Coast of West Africa), Amazonian Manatee (Amazonia) and the Dugong (Indian Ocean-Coasts of East Africa, India, Asia and Northern Australia).

It certainly is a possibility!

Resources: Manatee Conservation and Profile of a Manatee Researcher.

What happened to the Buoy 10 Fishery? For whatever reason the fish did not stop at the Buoy 10 area this year, disappointing many fishermen. The fish obviously moved through the area and headed to the upper stretches of the river. In August, sport fishermen caught almost 5,000 adult Chinook salmon (The record is 5,100 fish in 2002), many with sea lice, above Tongue Point.

Chinook are passing through the Bonneville Dam at a rate of 10,000 fish a day. Many areas of the upper river are recording excellent catches. The ocean has pretty much dried up for the present time, but those in the know expect late arrivals to appear soon after the majority of fishermen have gone home.

Albacore Albacore fishing remains a bright spot in the ocean with charter boats scoring good catches with

many fish in the 20- to 25-pound range. If you plan to eat albacore for the winter, you better act fast since all charter offices will be closing within the next few weeks.
Public meetings for upcoming clam season Shellfish managers will solicit ideas from the public during the upcoming planned meeting, Thursday Sept. 21, at the Super 8 Motel in Long Beach. The meeting will commence at 7 p.m., with shellfish managers reviewing the 2005-06 season and discuss findings of completed razor clam stock assessment.
Nautical Trivia Longitude - North and south circles pointing true north, measuring distance east and west from the prime meridian at Greenwich, England. The International Date Line is longitudinal.
Latitude - East and west circles running parallel to the Equator at 0 degrees, measuring distance north and south.
Lead Line - A weighted line, knotted at fathoms, lowered from the deck and used to determine the water depth.
Ron Malast is owner/operator of the charter boat Big Dipper sailing out of Ilwaco, 360-665-3573, raiders@reachone.com
Caption:

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC photo
Manatees can grow to 12 feet.
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